

7-28-2017

Loss and New Growth: A History of Morris's Tree Canopy

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Recommended Citation

Freske, Sarah, "Loss and New Growth: A History of Morris's Tree Canopy" (2017). *Campus News Archive*. 2305.
http://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/urel_news/2305

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Loss and New Growth: A History of Morris's Tree Canopy

More than 100 years after the Sisters of Mercy managed the Morris campus, some original trees still stand, while others have been lost to disease, storms, and development.

At the beginning of the 20th century the Morris campus was a different place. A dense grove of scotch pine and colorado blue spruce edged the cemetery, and cottonwoods and elm trees shaded the campus. Before 1909 the grounds held an American Indian boarding school, first run by the Sisters of Mercy. While the Multi-Ethnic Resource Center is the only building that remains from that time, numerous trees stand as a reminder of this history.

While a number of trees have fallen to natural causes and construction, some like the massive cottonwoods near Humanities Fine Arts and Gay Hall still mark the campus's original boundaries. Four rows of these cottonwoods once extended through campus, providing shade and a place to gather before most were cut down to make way for campus expansion.

Noticeably fewer now are the elm trees, whose number has been reduced by dutch elm disease. The elm in front of Imholte Hall was the latest to go. Disease had caused the tree to rot from the inside out, and it had become a hazard. The cottonwoods, too, are at risk of shedding their branches. A soft tree, cottonwoods only live to be around 100 years. The ones on campus are several decades beyond that.

Gail Boe, senior gardener, stresses that while maintaining the trees on campus is important, safety is the top priority. If a tree threatens students or buildings, it will have to be taken down to avoid accidents.

"It's really hard to lose some of those old trees," says Boe. "[But] we don't want a 30-mile-per-hour wind bringing down the top of a tree. It's really a people issue."

While some of Morris's historic trees are disappearing, [Facilities Management has worked to replace them with more resilient varieties that are less susceptible to disease](#). These include elm cultivars, honey locusts, white and burr oaks, lindens, ponderosa and scotch pines. Boe even helped plant two ginkgo trees near Camden 30 years ago. The diversity of the new trees, Boe says, limits the number that could be lost if disease were to spread through a single variety.

More cottonwoods have also been planted in outlying areas where they won't cause problems for pedestrians or buildings. Boe says Facilities Management will continue to monitor those originally planted by the Sisters of Mercy.

"We want to keep the historic cottonwoods as long as they are healthy, because they are a part of the campus's history," says Boe. "And on top of everything else, they're kind of magnificent."

The Morris campus and community have worked together to build a healthy tree canopy. They even earned Tree City and Tree Campus USA recognition. To learn more, visit morrismodel.org.